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The Long Itinerary to Normalization: The Cuban – Latin American Relations

Le long parcours vers la normalisation : les relations entre Cuba et l'Amérique latine

El largo itinerario de normalización: las relaciones entre Cuba y América Latina

Dirk Kruijt

Introduction¹

- 1 In Cuba, since 1902 an American protectorate, a regime change took place (1959) that produced enormous consequences for Latin America and the Caribbean. This happened at a key moment in the Cold War. The two world powers during the next three decades tried to establish friendly relations and defense alliances with countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. In the case of being confronted with countries adverse to their partnerships, they tried to influence the internal political structure or, if this resulted to be unsuccessful, to set off coups or participate in proxy warfare.
- 2 This article tries and traces these consequences in the context of Cuba's foreign relations with the Latin American and Caribbean region. My guiding research question is how Cuba coped with its singular position of enmity with the USA and Soviet friendship during the Cold War without losing its own long-term objective: not only survive but also produce radical changes in the Latin American and Caribbean region, Africa and Asia? And how did Cuba continue influencing its Caribbean and Latin American neighbours when the military muscle and the generous economic assistance of the Soviet Union ended?
- 3 In the course of this contribution it will become clear that Cuba, as a guiding principle, always sought and acquired political support from the non-aligned (NO AL) countries and became an eminent member state of this organization. And that it always accompanied its military endeavours with humanitarian aid as long as it had one of the largest standing

armies in the region. After the Cold War it continued its humanitarian assistance and maintained a position of influence far beyond its ‘country class’ of an island with eleven million inhabitants.

- 4 In this part I distinguish three phases: the period of revolutionary fervour, largely coinciding with the period of the 1960s. In that period Cuba was quickly affected by American hostility and aggression and sought political and economic support and stability from the Soviet Union. But it followed its own trajectory with respect to support to liberation movements and guerrilla warfare. The second period coincides with the 1980s and most of the 1990s, when Cuba’s political system was gradually more moulded after the Soviet Union and the economic and financial support of the COMECON countries was generous. But it continued to follow the course the leadership thought was appropriate: warfare in colonial conflicts in Africa, advice and support to guerrilla movements in the region while intensifying medical assistance.
- 5 The last phase is the post-1990 period of economic survival, restructuring of the economy and bit-by-bit political reforms, still expanding its medical and literacy campaigns and finding an economic and political good friend in the person of Venezuela’s president Hugo Chávez. Cuba’s post-Cold War humanitarian internationalism provided it with the sympathy, gratitude or at least appreciation of many, if not most Latin American and Caribbean governments. It also coincided with Latin America’s Pink Tide governments (pro-poor and reform minded governments) that emerged in important countries of the region at the turn of the century. When Fidel Castro was succeeded by his brother Raúl (2006) a more pragmatic external policy and a cautious internal economic reform program was implemented. The icy relations with the Catholic episcopate in Cuba slowly melted and that paved the way to a rapport with the United States during the Obama administration. This article is especially concerned with the Cuban-Latin American relationship and the role of the countries in the region in the long period of diplomatic defrosting.
- 6 Much of the argumentation is based on new information, basically obtained from original fieldwork between 2010 and 2013, and more specifically on numerous interviews with key actors from the Cuban leadership. The interviews refer to two categories of persons: the veterans of the insurgency of Fidel and Raúl Castro and Che Guevara, and the (retired) officers of the Departamento América, after 1975 resorting under the Central Committee of the Party and before operating in the corridors of the Ministry of the Interior (MININT) where it was part of Cuba’s intelligence structure. The Departamento America and its predecessors functioned as the ‘eyes and ears of Fidel Castro’ and were the direct liaison with the Latin American insurgency.

The decade of the 1960s

- 7 The Cuban Revolution began as a revolt against a hated dictator, supported by the American government. Urban insurgency movements and a rural guerrilla succeeded in surviving a repressive political police apparatus and to wage war against a massive counterinsurgency deployment. Eventually Batista’s army imploded and the guerrilla movement prevailed.

- 8 After the victory in January 1959, a significant number of combatants thought that they had fulfilled their patriotic duty and went back to home to resume their daily lives. It took more than two years before the new government declared Cuba a socialist country.
- 9 In the course of these two years, Cuba had become heavily involved in a power play between the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. The USA had followed the progression of the Cuban reforms and its radicalization process with growing uneasiness. It interpreted its internal trajectory as a march towards communism. Already in December 1959 the Eisenhower administration approved an action plan to overthrow Castro. Soviet Vice-Premier Mikoyan visited Cuba in February 1960 and three months later diplomatic relations with Moscow were instituted. The Soviet Union also started to provide economic and military support.
- 10 Meanwhile, in 1960 and 1961 assaults on Cuban civilian targets took place: economic sabotage, bombings, assassination attempts and even killings by actors operating from the USA. In the course of action, some covert operators and CIA agents were arrested (Solomon D., 2011; Escalante Font F., 2010). In April 1961, a battle group of 1,400 paramilitary mercenaries, trained in Guatemala and Nicaragua, invaded Cuba. But Fidel Castro had mobilized the army and the newly created militias. After two days of severe fighting the invaders surrendered with the loss of 114 dead and 1,200 captured. Exactly one day before, Castro, addressing a speech to an audience of a million people, declared the country a socialist one under enormous applause.
- 11 In May 1962 Khrushchev became Cuba's self-appointed military protector by soliciting Fidel Castro's permission to deploy nuclear missiles on the island. When the Kennedy administration was informed about their presence and launching capacity, the president ordered a naval blockade. Under the threat of a nuclear war, the Soviet and the American governments cut a secret deal. The Cuban leadership was informed by the international press and felt humiliated (Ramonet I., 2008:312). The Soviet Union overcame the situation with increasing grants and military assistance. In 1972 Cuba became a full member of COMECON although it never became a member of the Warsaw Pact.
- 12 The blockade imposed by the USA was to become eternalized in a fifty-year long economic embargo². It was also accompanied by a diplomatic quarantine. Cuba's membership of the Organization of American States (OAS) was suspended in 1962, under strong pressure from the United States. All Latin American countries ruptured their diplomatic relations with Cuba, with the exception of Mexico³. In the 1960s, Cuba trained and supported guerrilla movements in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Haiti, Honduras, Guatemala, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela⁴. The main coordinating instrument was the Departamento América, the specialized liaison structure with the guerrilla movements whose previous organizational structures were incorporated in the intelligence and Special Forces structures⁵.
- 13 Che Guevara's campaign in Bolivia ended with his capture and murder⁶. But everywhere in the Caribbean and in Latin America, regular armies, police detachments and paramilitary units succeeded in defeating or at least isolating all existing guerrilla movements in these years, generally after barbaric counterinsurgency campaigns. While Guevara had promoted "one, two, three Vietnams", the United States and the military dictatorships in the region had successfully prevented two or three other Cuba's.

The changing context in the 1970s and 1980s

- 14 In the 1970s Cuba initiated a new approach of more flexibility and pragmatism with respect to Latin America and the Soviet Union. Cuba's economic development stagnated and its survival increasingly depended on external supplies and East European subsidies. Realignment with Moscow, accompanied by "ideological realism", was thus unavoidable (Blight J. & Brenner P., 2002). The Cuban leadership imported a substantial number of Soviet experts. The number of Soviet specialists increased from 1,000 in the early 1960s to 6,000 by 1975; 50% were military specialists (Duncan W.R., 1985:87ff,101). Soviet financing had made Cuba heavily dependent on continuous COMECON imports and subsidies.
- 15 By and large, the 1970s and the 1980s were years of Cuba's relative prosperity. Housing, medical provisions, schools and universities, electricity, domestic telephone provision, sports and cultural facilities, radio, TV, and even clothing were provided by the state. A professional could earn 500 pesos (rubles) per month; a secretary went home with 150 pesos. Prices were controlled. Transport was becoming a problem, but one could win a Lada car by merit⁷. Unemployment was below 4%. Cuba's annual growth between 1975 and 1985 was more than 4%, more favorable than that of the economies of the rest of Latin America and the Caribbean, with average growth rates around 1%⁸.
- 16 There are indications that the Soviet Union advised on the closure of the sections of assistance to the Middle East and Africa, and the eventual transference of the Departamento América to the 'civilian' Committee of International Department of International Relations of the Central Committee⁹. But whatever influence the Soviet Union had, Castro maintained a relatively independent course with respect to Latin America and the Caribbean. As Soviet intelligence officials observed as well, Castro was never an obedient disciple of Soviet politics (Pavlov Y., 1994:97ff)
- 17 Cuba had had a formidable army that sometimes combined regular and irregular warfare like the Vietnamese. During the three decades of 'fraternal cooperation' between the Soviet Union and Cuba, on an annual basis the army was provided with supplies, training and equipment worth about 1 billion dollars. At the peak of expansion, by the end of the 1970s and during its Africa campaigns, the armed forces had between 470,000 and 510,000 members. A notable analyst, Latell, CIA officer at the Cuba desk in 1964 and the National Intelligence Officer for Latin America in the 1990s, observes:

It was the largest military force in Latin America and vastly bigger than those of countries Cuba's size anywhere in the world. Furthermore, man for man during the 1970s and 1980s, it may have been the best and most experienced fighting force of any small nation, with the single exception of Israel (Latell B., 2003:10-11).
- 18 In Latin America, the 1970s and 1980s were the period of the Dependency Theory at the universities and the Liberation Theology in the churches. The student generations and the radicalizing Catholics were appealed by the anti-imperialist arguments of the dependency theorists. Liberation Theology was even more influential in the hearts and minds of large segments of the Latin American population. The influence of the new theology on center-left and far-left groups of the existing and new revolutionary movements is conclusive. In Central America Liberation Theology was of enormous influence. Half of the circa forty Nicaraguan comandantes were recruited by radicalized priests. Thousands of Church Base Communities supported the guerrilla organizations in El Salvador. In Guatemala Jesuit and Maryknoll priests were organizing Mayan

communities. Many young guerrilla leaders were recruited from the Central American student movement (Kruijt D., 2008:44-47). Murdered Che Guevara and fallen Colombian ELN priest Camilo Torres were both revolutionary and moral icons. Archbishop Romero was assassinated in 1980 while celebrating mass; he and several other killed Jesuit priests San Salvador were also incorporated into the rows of Latin American revolutionary heroes and martyrs.

- 19 In this context of Dependency Theory and Liberation Theology, Cuba reoriented its appreciation of new actors and organizations in Latin America. The Instituto Cubano de Amistad con los Pueblos (ICAP) identified other actors and movements beyond the traditional “revolutionaries”. It was time to pay attention to the nationalist-leftists regimes and movements:

We realized that by being more open-minded and using a more delicate tone, we penetrated sectors to which we otherwise would never have gotten access. That is what we called “popular diplomacy”, going beyond the sectors we traditionally reached, the so-called “revolutionary sectors”¹⁰.

- 20 The ICAP also created ‘visiting brigades’: American visitors and students came to the island with the Brigada Venceremos, and Europeans with the Brigada Europa. Later, the Brigada Latinoamericana was founded. Notwithstanding the official Cuban ‘scientific atheism’, the ICAP and the Departamento América tried to invite the representatives of the new theologians to the island:

During a long period we maintained good relations with many of the progressive religious believers of the continent. A large number came to Cuba and it facilitated the ideological and political insight of Cubans into that even so important issue. On matters of religion many Latin Americans and some Europeans, like François Houtart, assisted us. I conversed and dined twice with Gustavo Gutiérrez, the founder of Liberation Theology, and transmitted him Fidel’s invitation to come to Cuba. But he didn’t dare to make that trip

- 21 remembers Martínez Heredia, Cuba’s leading philosopher until his death in 2017¹¹. Famous Dominican Frei Betto (1985) came to Havana and interviewed Fidel Castro about religion and revolution. In the early 1990s, the ICAP co-organized solidarity flights from Brazil (with theologians Frei Betto and Leonardo Boff who celebrated mass), accompanied by entrepreneurs, politicians, students and artists. ICAP also assisted in masses celebrated by progressive priests with solidarity groups from Argentina and Colombia¹².

- 22 In general, Cuba actively supported guerrilla movements that opposed military dictatorships.

- 23 Previously, in the 1960s Cuba separately trained all individual guerrilla movements, even when they were competitors in the same country, like in Argentina, Central America, Colombia, Peru and Venezuela. The code of conduct of the Departamento América was to be strict neutrality in ideological arguments. But now it explicitly tried to create politico-military umbrella organizations: in Argentina where its diplomats attempted to mediate between the Montoneros and the Trotskyist-Guevarist ERP; in post-Allende Chile doing their utmost to unify the MIR and the Frente Patriótico Manuel Rodríguez (FPMR); and assisting the Colombian Coordinadora Guerrillera Simón Bolívar (CGSB, 1987-1990). The unification of three diverging Sandinista guerrilla segments in Nicaragua was built at the Cuban embassy in Panama (1978/79¹³). The gradual unity between the five guerrilla groups in El Salvador was shaped at Cuba’s Mexican embassy (1980/82). After large discussions, the four antagonistic Guatemalan guerrilla movements integrated into the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG, 1982), also in Mexico City.

The end of the diplomatic quarantine and Cuba's new pragmatism

- 24 In the 1970s, many of Cuba's political alliances with leftist movements and its leaders were based on personal friendships with Fidel: in the Caribbean with the leaders of Jamaica, Granada, Guayana, and Surinam. Castro also became close with Chile's president Allende, Panama's leader General Torrijos and the political team of Peruvian president General Velasco¹⁴. He also chose Cuban diplomats who would probably be appreciated by these leaders and would become 'friends of the president', even before the establishment of formal bilateral relations. Cuba managed to resume diplomatic relations with various Latin American countries: Chile (November 1970), Peru (July 1972), Ecuador (August 1972), Panama (August 1974) and Argentina (May 1973) after the return of Perón. Venezuela reinstated its embassy in Havana in December 1974 and Colombia in March 1975. In 1977, Costa Rica resumed bilateral consular relations. Some countries suspended their bilateral relations temporarily: Colombia (1981) and Costa Rica (1981). In the 1990s and 2000s, all Latin American countries had established or renewed their diplomatic relations.
- 25 Cuba certainly has a special affinity with the Caribbean island states (Hernández R., 2011; Cecena A. E. et al, 2011). There is certainly a kind of 'Caribbeanism' that makes personal relations easy, despite linguistic and cultural differences¹⁵. The English speaking independent or recently independent states were (and are) sympathetic to Cuba. Barbados, Guyana, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago took the collective decision to inaugurate diplomatic relations with the country in December 1972. The Bahamas followed in 1974, Granada in April 1979, (Dutch speaking) Surinam in May 1979, and Santa Lucia in August 1979. In the 1990s, San Vicente and Nevis, Antigua and Barbuda, San Cristobal and Nevis, and Dominica did the same. Relations with the Association of Caribbean States (ACS), in which islands and territories with American, English, French and Dutch statehood also participate, were fluid. During its decades-long dictatorship, the two countries of the former Hispaniola had suspended (Haiti) or ruptured (Dominican Republic) their diplomatic relations; they normalized their relations in 1966 (Haiti) and 1998 (Dominican Republic)¹⁶.
- 26 Once diplomatic relations were established, Cuba retracted direct support to the Armed Left. The most significant country was Mexico, Cuba's diplomatic life line. Diplomats and visiting officials of the Departamento América had to explain to insurgent groups that Cuba could not be of assistance. When diplomatic relations with Colombia had been resumed, the new Cuban ambassador in Bogotá had the delicate task to inform the Colombian president that Fabio Vásquez, leader of the ELN, was living in Havana and was receiving medical treatment there. Then he had to explain to the (guevarista) ELN leadership, that "Cuba, given the new circumstances, could not continue supporting [them] like in the previous years"¹⁷. After the fall of Allende, the Chilean Christian Democrats, the Socialist Party and the Communist Party had formed an alliance, after discussions in Cuba. Meanwhile, the Frente Patriótico Manuel Rodríguez (FPMR) was created in Cuba at Fidel Castro's suggestion with direct assistance of the Departamento América, as the armed branch of the Communist Party. When the FPMR severed its ties with the PC Cuba made a judgement of Salomon and attended both the PC and the FPMR. But the Departamento América told the FPMR leadership about Castro's promise to the

Christian Democrats that, after Pinochet's eventual demise, Cuba's relationship with the Chilean left would only be 'humanitarian'. Indeed, the Departamento América maintained good relations with the FPMR and the PC, but in 1990 it broke off all relations¹⁸. Cuba's pragmatism can best be illustrated by the case of the Argentinean ERP. After the coup in 1976, Argentina maintained diplomatic relations with Cuba and delivered strategic goods to the island. When Mattini, the last comandante of the ERP, asked the Cuban leadership for support, it was denied¹⁹.

Cuba's Soft Power Diplomacy after 1989

- 27 Cuba's military was also hit hard by the downfall of the Socialist Block. In December 1982, Soviet Party leader Andropov had notified Raúl Castro that the Soviet Union would not defend Cuba by sending troops. Economic and military support by the Soviets continued on a diminishing scale after 1985, but fell dramatically by the end of 1991, when the Soviet Union morphed into Russia. Delivery of new weapons and spare parts was very difficult; the only possibility to maintain operational condition of the military was cannibalizing older equipment. Fuel was restricted for emergency situations²⁰. The Armed Forces were officially halved while the budget was cut in half (Klepak H., 2000:3ff.; 2005: 47ff). A similar process occurred with respect to the military structures and the intelligence provisions within the Ministry of the Interior. In 1994, the Special Forces of this ministry, the training specialists of the Latin American guerrilla in former decades, were dissolved.
- 28 The Cuban government announced a "Special Period in Peacetime", to tighten the belt, to hold out and to proceed while the standard of living shrunk to severe proportions. Cuba's economy and society were transfigured into a Spartan system of extreme austerity and ideological tightening. When in the late 1980s the leadership of the Colombian M-19 visited the island and asked for support, Fidel Castro told him frankly that the only solution was a political one, by means of peace negotiations:
- At that moment, Comandante Carlos Pizarro came to Cuba to ask for help. Cuba's austerity period, the "Período Especial", had begun. Fidel told him that he should pursue a negotiated political solution. In his view, at that moment there were very few possibilities for a politico-military organisation to come to power by means of weapons, as had [once] happened in Cuba and Nicaragua²¹.
- 29 And when Hugo Chávez in 1994 negotiated with Cuban diplomats about his first trip to Cuba, they told him that "Cuba not even could buy him a matchbox". Chavez decided to buy the ticket himself²².
- 30 Confronted by its own austerity and reduction of military capability, Cuba did neither reduce its diplomacy nor its foreign aid. Cuba continued to maintain diplomatic relations throughout the world. While cutting its training assistance to the insurgency movements in the region, it intensified its medical assistance to Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa. And it used its international prestige to act as peace facilitator in Central America and Colombia where guerrilla and counterinsurgency operations continued in the 1990s and thereafter.

The Soft Power of medical and literacy and assistance

23

- 31 Cuba's internationalism, which in previous decades had been predominantly expressed by support for guerrilla movements in Latin America and the Caribbean and large scale military operations in Africa, had now turned into the provision for humanitarian assistance in medical and literacy teams²⁴. In fact, Cuba had always been a kind of medical facility receiving and revalidating wounded and crippled guerrilla militants in the region. But not only had the Far Left benefited from Cuba's medical infrastructure. After the Chernobyl disaster, Castro offered to assist the (then) infant victims and it is still doing it. Even political enemies were offered medical treatment. Abreu, during 35 years the overviewer of the Departamento América for Central America offered dying ex-major D'Aubuisson, founder of ARENA, medical treatment in Cuba when he was denied proper attention in the United States in 1992 (Abreu R., 2013:226-230). The military missions in Africa had always been accompanied by medical and literacy campaigns, but on a lesser scale.
- 32 Cuba's civilian development aid ('internationalism') provided over five decades poor citizens in underdeveloped or poor countries with assistance in which Cuba has leading expertise: public health provisions and literacy campaigns, post-disaster-reconstruction, and sport (training and facilities). Kirk calculated that
- (...) in all, over 135,000 medical professionals from Cuba have worked [in Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia]. Between 1960 and 2014, there were some 50,000 of them (including 25,000 doctors) working in over 60 developing countries. Significantly 69 percent of Cuban doctors have participated in at least one mission abroad (...) (Kirk J., 2015:3; Feinsilver J., 2010).
- 33 Cuba assisted in the establishment of medical schools in Yemen (1976), Guyana (1984), Ethiopia (1984), Guinea Bissau (1986), Uganda (1988), Ghana (1991) Luanda (1992), Gambia (2000), Equatorial Guinea (2000), Haiti (2001) and Eritrea (2003)²⁵. The first Cuban medical mission abroad was in Algeria (1963). Already by 1978, around 2,000 Cuban health personnel worked abroad; in 1999 there were around 3,000. That number then increased to 3,800 in 2001, 15,000 in 2003, 25,000 in 2005 and 30,000 in 2007 (Kirk J & Erisman H.M., 2009:8,12). During the administration of Raúl Castro (2006-present) this number had grown and other medical initiatives (medical schooling for foreigners, for example) have been continued or expanded. It brought and brings Cuba an enormous amount of prestige, not only in Latin America and the Caribbean, but in the entire Global South (Huish R., 2014:188ff)
- 34 In October 1998, Fidel Castro launched the idea of a special Medical School for Latin American students, the Escuela Latinoamericana de Ciencias Médicas (ELAM); the new university opened its doors in September 1999 with students of eighteen Latin American and Caribbean countries. But in the mid-2000s it started to attract students from other continents and, between 2010 and 2012, the annual number of ELAM graduates was around 3,000. In 2012, students from 98 countries (with 31 mother tongues) were matriculated at the ELAM. The ELAM system and the study allowances also expanded to other countries when, after the creation of the ALBA alliance between Cuba and Venezuela (see below), Hugo Chávez co-financed and co-developed the Cuban initiative.

ELAM-like medical schools were established in Bolivia, Nicaragua and Venezuela and an undergraduate school was set up in Guyana and Nicaragua²⁶.

- 35 Medical brigades operated or still operate in many Latin American and Caribbean countries, especially after natural disasters²⁷. They continued to work even when, after a regime change, a new national government was adverse to Cuba. The most recent example is that of Honduras, where progressive President Zelaya was ousted by a military coup. The Cuban government decided not to withdraw their medical personnel and the new Honduran administration continued to pay their counterpart obligations. In 2004, Cuba launched the program Operación Milagro (Operation Miracle) to cure cataract and other eye diseases, co-financed by Venezuela. It started in that country and was extended to many other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, and also in Africa and Asia. According to official data 2,577,000 persons benefitted from this Cuban-Venezuelan initiative between 2004 and 2015. According to official data provided by its director Ricardo Riera, nearly four million persons (of which 2'279,259 were Venezuelan patients) benefitted from this Cuban-Venezuelan initiative between July 2004 and June 2015 (Telesur, 2016).
- 36 A second instrument of international assistance is that of literacy campaigns. After tests in Angola, Haiti and Nicaragua, in 2000 a literacy program called 'Yo, sí puedo' was developed. In the early 2000s it was widely implemented in Venezuela on a massive scale²⁸. In 2006, within the context of Cuban and Venezuelan support to Bolivia, the program was adapted in this multinational and multilingual country. Of the indigenous population, around 40,000 Quechua and Aymara monolingual Bolivians benefitted from the program. Meanwhile, Cuba had implemented adapted versions of 'Yes, I can' in thirty countries (Abendroth M., 2009).
- 37 At the turn of the century, Cuba gained a remarkable friend that fortified both its economy and its international aspirations. Even before Hugo Chávez was elected president of Venezuela, he and Fidel Castro had developed a personal and political friendship. In 2000, Chávez and Castro cemented their relationship by a mutually beneficial agreement: Cuban doctors and educational experts went to Venezuela. Cuba accomplished a substantial provision of oil at preferential rates. After the creation of the ALBA (Alianza Bolivariana para los pueblos de Nuestra América) between Cuba and Venezuela, Chávez became its financier. He also generously co-financed Cuba's civilian internationalism abroad.

The Soft Power of peace provider

- 38 Over the course of several decades, the press and mass media has portrayed Cuba as the archetypical warmonger, whose secret service was always on the alert to proliferate subversive, terrorist and guerrilla movements worldwide, and especially in Africa and Latin America. Interestingly enough, the Departamento América began to get involved with peace negotiations in the late 1980s and thereafter. Here I present the case of two countries in which Cuba (and Norway) displayed an important role and gained prestige in Latin America.
- 39 After the brutal years of counterinsurgency (1978-1983) under the military governments of the General-Presidents Lucas García and Ríos Montt, the guerrilla lost the war (Balconi J. and Kruijt D., 2004, and Kruijt D., 2008: 144-153; 2017: 186-189). They had retired to the

remote indigenous regions, retaining some smaller urban pockets in the western highlands and the northern jungle. The leadership of the URNG lived in exile in Mexico City, from where the chief commanders directed the war by fax and telephone. Peace talks were initiated in Oslo in 1990 and a national peace commission, headed by the archbishop, was inaugurated. The peace negotiations were presided over first by the archbishop and then by a special UN envoy.

- 40 But the real breakthrough came when two key negotiators, Rodrigo Asturias (Comandante-en-Jefe of the Organización del Pueblo en Armas, ORPA, and one of the URNG negotiators) and General Julio Balconi (appointed as minister of defense in 1996) reached an agreement about informal consultations to avoid friction and confrontation at the peace table. They developed a relationship of mutual trust and rapport. In early 1993 army delegates and the guerrilla leadership convened in extra-official sessions, with the silent approval of the civilian presidents. Norway and Cuba played favorable roles as facilitators. In March 1993, Cuba's good offices were employed to organize a three-day session of reconciliation between the army and the guerrilla²⁹. Both Fidel and Raúl were very accommodating and after the Havana session, the URNG announced a unilateral cease-fire while Balconi dissolved and disarmed the paramilitary patrols. The army staff and the second-in-commands of the guerrilla worked out a timetable of disarmament. Between March and December 1996, when the final peace agreements were signed, the army ceased to attack the guerrilla encampments and disarmed the paramilitary forces. The peace negotiations were successfully ended after the Havana sessions.
- 41 Cuba acted as a peace facilitator, at the request of both the Colombian government and the guerrilla movements FARC and ELN (Segura R. & Mechoulam D., 2017; see Herbolzheimer K., 2016). During a previous peace process (1989-1991), when M-19 and other guerrilla groups signed a peace agreement and were incorporated into Colombian society, Cuba also acted as a peace facilitator, at the request of both the Colombian government and the guerrilla movements. During the next two decades, the Departamento América and Fidel Castro in person dedicated much time to the efforts of the consecutive Colombian presidents and the changing leadership of the FARC and the ELN to reach an agreement or to establish periods of temporary cease-fire³⁰.
- 42 In the early 1990s, the FARC negotiated with representatives of President César Gaviria in Venezuela and Mexico without even reaching the minimum terms for an agreement. In 1998 President Pastrana offered the FARC a demilitarized zone in El Caguán in order to initiate new peace consultations. Previously, he had requested the good offices of Castro through a representative of the Departamento América. In 2001 the FARC and the government exchanged prisoners³¹. But the peace negotiations stagnated. In 2002, President Pastrana suspended the dialogues and the war continued. When Uribe won the presidential elections that year, the war intensified and both the FARC and the ELN lost territorial control and saw their number of combatants reduce. Uribe initiated a programme of mass demobilization of the paramilitary forces and established a legal opportunity for individuals to leave the guerrilla on easy terms. The majority was demobilized between 2003 and 2006. In April 2017, 58,987 former combatants (of which 25% were reported to be deserted guerrilleros) were enlisted in a programme of social reintegration³². When in 2010 President Santos was inaugurated, the FARC requested a new round of negotiations and the new president acceded. Through the good offices of Norway and Cuba, bilateral negotiations started in Havana in 2012. In November 2016, the

FARC and the Colombian government signed the final peace agreement³³. In February 2017 peace negotiations began between the ELN and the Colombian government in Quito.

Conclusion: the normalization with the United States

- 43 Cuba was one of the twenty founding members of the OAS in 1948. In 1962 its membership was suspended by a majority vote, under strong American pressure. The island was excluded because “Marxism–Leninism was incompatible” with the principles and objectives of the inter-American system³⁴. Initially, the United States had also tried to convince the OAS members applying economic sanctions as well, but that was refused by Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador and Mexico. The United States’ two neighbor countries, Canada and Mexico, never ruptured diplomatic relations with Cuba.
- 44 During the Reagan administration, Cuba was put on the US “State Sponsors of Terrorism” list in 1982. There is no second country in the world that was the subject of American sanctions during so many decades. The embargo also affected the large Cuban-American diaspora living in the United States via rigorous travel restrictions and the limited possibility to send dollar remittances to their family members.
- 45 Cuban diplomacy was always interested in (re-)establishing and maintaining good relations with all member states of the United Nations. It participated and participates in nearly all organizations of the UN- system. This even during its most extreme period of austerity, it never reduced its system of international relations. But especially it nurtured its relations with Latin America and with the Caribbean states. Its Soft Power prestige and its reputation as an important international and regional assistance made the persistent economic embargo a kind of Old Cold War relic. Year after year the Assembly of the United Nations voted against the continuance of the embargo, with a growing majority of countries condemning the U.S. embargo. In 2016, 191 member countries backed the resolution.
- 46 Cuba also sought to strengthen Caribbean and Latin American organizations without participation of the United States. In 2004, in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Paraguay, Peru, Suriname, Uruguay and Venezuela created the South American Community of Nations in Cusco, renamed in 2007 the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR). UNASUR is in many aspects a kind of the South American OAS. Another alternative for the OAS without the United States was created in 2011 in Caracas as the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC). Cuba and Venezuela were the leading countries of the ALBA group of countries created in 2004 and expanded afterwards. Cuba’s suspension from the OAS appeared to many of its members an odd relic from the Cold War. In 2007 the OAS countries invited Cuba to retake its seat, even with the consent of the United States. But this time Cuba rebuffed the invitation, a stance that officially was maintained until 2014.
- 47 Until 2013 the most important countries of the region were governed by center-left or leftist governments. With the support of friendly governments in such important countries as Argentina (under the presidency of the Kirchners, 2003-2015), Brazil (under the presidency of Lula and Dilma, 2003-2014) and Venezuela (under Chávez, 1999-2013) Cuba had become a much appreciated country in the entire Latin American and Caribbean region. It also helped that three former national labor union leaders had become presidents of their countries: Lula (Brazil), Morales (Bolivia) and Maduro

(Venezuela). Furthermore, former guerrilla leaders were elected president or vice-president in Bolivia, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Uruguay.

- 48 The only country in the Western Hemisphere remaining hostile to Cuba was the United States, the “Colossus of the North” in Cuba’s terminology. Notwithstanding mutual hostility, the United States and Cuba had a history of decades-long negotiation about normalization, officially and via back channels³⁵. In 1977 a minimum degree of formal diplomatic interaction contact was established by the United States Interests Section (of the Embassy of Switzerland) in Havana, and its counterpart Interests Section of the Republic of Cuba in Washington. Visiting government officials of both countries continued to discuss and negotiate. In their very detailed analysis of the character of the negotiations and the asymmetric power relations, LeoGrande and Kornbluh conclude that in general “(...) the Cubans have been too eager to negotiate and too gullible in believing U.S. promises” (LeoGrande W. and Kornbluh P., 2014: 407).
- 49 At the end of the first decade of this century, under the presidency of Raúl Castro, a prudent program of economic and political reforms had initiated. One of the most delicate problems was the relation with the Catholic episcopate, icy for 50 years. But the relation slowly improved. A nasty incident triggered the beginning of a rapport³⁶. The protesters’ group Damas en Blanco (Women in White), spouses and female relatives of dissident prisoners, used to demonstrate every Sunday morning around the churches in Havana. Cuba’s ‘voluntary shock groups’ intimidated demonstrators, sometimes in a heavy-handed manner. In 2010 such a group pursued the women into the Church. The hitherto very guarded episcopate thought that ‘enough was enough’ and wrote a letter to Eusebio Leal Spengler, historian of Havana and a close friend of Raúl, to request a high-level meeting. As a consequence, the Cuban President and Cardinal Jaime Ortega y Alamino initiated a “dialogue on issues of mutual interest between the Cuban state and the Catholic Church in Cuba.” Afterwards, the cardinal made several trips to Washington. This budding relationship also permitted a much better understanding between Cuba and the Vatican. In 2013, when the Argentinean Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio – in whose ideas one can trace some affinity with Liberation Theology – became Pope Francis, the Vatican functioned as a broker between Cuba and the United States³⁷. It paved the way to restoring diplomatic ties and the normalization of relations between the two countries.
- 50 In 2008 then presidential candidate Obama had already had hinted at ‘direct diplomacy’ with Cuba. In the first months of his first term he relieved restrictions on travel and remittances. At the beginning of Obama’s second term relations improved. A large part of the rapprochement between the two countries was negotiated in secret. Still, the announcement in Havana and Washington that both governments would restore full diplomatic ties came as a surprise to most observers of the US-Cuban relationship. The Cold War for Cuba ended in December 2014. However, in 2017, incoming US president Trump re-frosted much of the warmer relations that his antecessor initiated.

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NOTES

1. In this article I heavily draw on research published as Kruijt, 2017.
2. For a more detailed overview of the US-Cuban relations and the consequences of the embargo, see Bernell, 2011, Dávalos Fernández, 2012, and Spadoni, 2010.
3. Bolivia, Chile and Uruguay broke their diplomatic relations in 1964 after explicit American admonition. Canada (until 1990 only an observer of the OAS) never interrupted its diplomatic relations with Cuba.
4. For detailed analyses of Cuba's influence and the existing guerrilla movements in this period, see Gott, 1971, Lamberg, 1979, Wickham-Crowley, 1992, Oikión Solano, Rey Tristán and López Ávalos, 2014 and Martín Álvarez and Rey Tristan, 2017.
5. Formally, the Departamento America was created in 1975, but all its institutional predecessors were staffed by the same persons under command of Manuel Piñeiro (until 1992). The institutions evolved from G2 (1959) in M in Vice Ministerio Técnico (VMT) in Dirección General de Inteligencia (DGI) in Dirección General de Liberación Nacional (DGLN) and finally in Departamento América.
6. It was the only Cuban operation in Latin America where the majority of the guerrilleros was Cuban, not local nationals. The Cuban members of his guerrilla column were experienced veteran combatants. For a detailed analysis of the failed campaign, see James, 2001 [1960], based on data provided by the CIA. See also Prado Salmón, 1987; general (then captain) Gary Prado Salmón was the leader of the army unit that captured Che Guevara.
7. Data mentioned by Sergio Guerra Vilaboy, Head of the Department of History at the University of Havana, during a seminar at the Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, 24 April 2014.
8. Data of Guerra Vilaboy and Maldonado Gallardo, 2005, p. 129, and Domínguez Guadarrama, 2013, p. 136-138.
9. Interview with Osvaldo Cárdenas (Havana, 18 October 2012); at that time Cárdenas was the Caribbean Section Chief.
10. Interview with Luis Morejón (Havana, 1 March 2012); Morejón was the deputy Director of the ICAP.
11. Interview with Fernando Martínez Heredia (Havana, 2 March 2012).
12. Interview with Luis Morejón (Havana, 1 March 2012).
13. Interview with Julio López Campos (Managua, 2 June 2011). López was the head of the Sandinista Department of International Relations until 1990.
14. And for a shorter period the progressive Bolivian Generals Obando and Torres and the General Rodríguez Lara in Ecuador.
15. Otto Marrero, during 44 years the Head of the Caribbean Section of the Department of International Relations of the Central Committee (conversation 5 December 2012 in Havana).
16. In 1983, Granada and Surinam had suspended or broken off their relations with Cuba; Granada re-established its relations in 1992 and Surinam in 1995.
17. Interview with Fernando Ravelo Renedo (Havana, 17 October 2011); Ravelo was the newly appointed ambassador.

18. Interview with Luis Rojas Nuñez (Havana, 20 January 2012); Rojas was the representative of the FPMR.
19. Interview with Arnol Kremer (Luis Mattini), the last comandante of the ERP before its dissolution (Buenos Aires, 22 and 25 April 2017).
20. When a Guatemalan army delegation visited the island in 1996, during the reconciliation sessions with the guerrilla, the pilots were shown all MIGS but they were not ignited; that was only permitted in case of an emergency (conversations with General Julio Balconi in Cuba, October 2003, when we wrote the final draft of his memoirs [Balconi and Kruijt, 2004] in Havana).
21. Interview with Jorge Luis Joa, 27 October 2011; at that time Joa was the official of the Departamento América in charge of Colombia.
22. Interview with Carlos Antelo (24 and 27 October 2011); at that time Antelo was the official of the Departamento América stationed at the Cuban embassy.
23. In this section I draw on chapter 6 of Kruijt, 2017.
24. and Kirk and Erisman, 2009; with regard to Cuba's medical assistance. About Cuba's civilian assistance, see also Kumaraswami, 2012)
25. *Colaboración Médica Cubana* – EcuRed, EcuRed, http://www.ecured.cu/Colaboraci%C3%B3n_M%C3%A9dica_Cubana (page consulted 3 July 2017).
26. Interview with Maritza González Bravo, academic vice-rector of the ELAM system (9 November 2012).
27. Kirk and Erisman, 2009, p.134 ff., provide the specifics about Cuba's medical assistance in Latin America and the Caribbean. For a testimonial account of the medical missions in Africa, see López Blanch, 2005.
28. Interview with Javier Labrada, 8 November 2012); Labrada was a senior adviser in Venezuela, Bolivia and Haiti.
29. Interview with Ramiro Abreu (25 October 2011); Abreu was the overviewer of the Departamento América for Central America.
30. Castro even allowed a book publication, Castro Ruz 2009, about the repeated requests of Cuba's good offices to be published, with excerpts of diplomatic reports, accounts by officers of the Departamento América, and taped conversations between Castro and guerrilla leaders in Havana and elsewhere.
31. In 2007 another exchange of prisoners took place under the auspices of President Chávez of Venezuela.
32. Data published by the Agencia Colombiana de Reinserción (ACR, table 1).
33. Segura and Mechoulam, 2017, p. 1, 4, 9-11, 13, 36, repeatedly mention the decisive role of Cuba.
34. Quoted in Birsén, 2015.
35. A very fine and detailed analysis of the intents to normalize US-Cuban relations is LeoGrande and Kornbluh, 2014, and Ramírez Cañedo and Morales Domínguez, 2014.
36. Interview with Mgrs. Emilio Aranguren Echeverría, bishop of Holguín, then in charge of the episcopal Human Rights Commission (Holguín, 4 August 2010).
37. On 12 February 2016, Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill, the heads of the Roman Catholic and the Russian Orthodox churches, met in Havana and issued a common statement; this time Raúl Castro was the go-between.

ABSTRACTS

After its Revolution Cuba was forced into a Latin American and Caribbean diplomatic quarantine by the United States. In the 1960s, Cuba's relations with the region were basically characterized by its support to insurgency and guerrilla movements. In the 1970s, Cuba overcame its isolation by normalizing relations in Latin America and with the newly independent Caribbean island-states. Support to the Armed Left was only given in the case of civil war against dictatorships; Cuba also assisted in building national umbrella organizations of insurgent movements. After 1985-1989 it used its Soft Power (medical brigades and facilities, literacy and post-disaster reconstruction teams), and its good offices during peace negotiations to become a much-respected country in the region. During the government of Raúl Castro economic and political reforms were initiated while a rapport with the Catholic episcopate was established. It contributed in facilitating with success the decades-long negotiations with the United States about normalizing relations. A substantial part of this article is based on new and recent interviews with numerous Cuban key actors.

Peu après le début de la Révolution, les États-Unis forcent l'Amérique latine et la Caraïbe à soumettre Cuba à une quarantaine diplomatique. Dans les années 1960, l'appui des insurrections et des mouvements de guérilla caractérisent les relations de Cuba avec la région. Dans les années 1970, Cuba dépasse son isolement en normalisant ses relations avec l'Amérique latine, et les États de la Caraïbe qui viennent juste d'accéder à l'indépendance. Le soutien à la gauche armée ne fut accordé qu'en cas de guerre civile contre des dictatures militaires. Cuba œuvre aussi pour l'unification des mouvements insurrectionnels. Après 1985-1989, Cuba emploie son soft-power (brigades et attention médicale, brigades d'alphabétisation et de bons offices pendant les négociations de paix) pour devenir un pays très respecté dans la région. Avec le gouvernement de Raúl Castro débutent des réformes économiques et politiques, et une relation de réconciliation avec l'épiscopat catholique. Cela facilite le succès des négociations ouvertes depuis plusieurs décennies en faveur de la normalisation avec les États-Unis. Une grande partie de cet article est basée sur des entretiens récents menés auprès de responsables cubains.

Después de su Revolución, Cuba fue sometida a una cuarentena diplomática por los Estados Unidos con respecto a América Latina y el Caribe. En la década de 1960, las relaciones de Cuba con la región se caracterizaron básicamente por su apoyo a la insurgencia y los movimientos guerrilleros. En la década de 1970, Cuba superó su aislamiento por la normalización de relaciones con América Latina y los estados Caribeños recientemente independizados. El apoyo a la izquierda armada fue otorgado solamente en caso de guerras civiles contra dictaduras militares. Cuba también ayudó en la construcción de organizaciones unitarias de movimientos insurgentes. Después de 1985-1989 utilizó su poder suave (brigadas y facilidades médicas y brigadas de alfabetización y buenos oficios durante las negociaciones de paz) para convertirse en un país altamente respetado en la región. Durante el gobierno de Raúl Castro se iniciaron reformas económicas y políticas, al mismo tiempo una relación de entendimiento con el episcopado católico fue establecido. Eso contribuyó a facilitar el éxito de las negociaciones de varias décadas con Estados Unidos sobre normalización de relaciones. Una parte de este artículo fue obtenido en base de entrevistas numerosas con actores claves cubanos.

INDEX

Palabras claves: Cuba, Estados Unidos, América Latina, Diplomacia de poder suave, Revoluciones

Keywords: Cuba, United States, Latin America, Soft Power Diplomacy, Revolutions

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